



## About the Author

John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton -- First Baron Acton of Aldenham -- was born in Naples, Italy on January 10, 1834. The son of a beknighted Englishman and a Rhenish Countess, Lord Acton studied history at the University of Munich: he was not permitted to attend Cambridge because he was a Catholic.

Lord Acton was elected to the House of Commons in 1859 and was offered a peerage in 1869. He was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University in 1895. Extremely well read, and having an intellect that is revered to this day, it is he who authored the now often quoted statement that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

## About the Speech

In this speech, Lord Acton provides an illuminating history of the interplay between the sources of governmental power, the scope of governmental power, and the choice of who should exercise governmental power. He makes clear the important point that democracy - a system in which power is thought to have its origins in the people - is no guarantee of liberty. He effectively submits that, in the absence of a moral code that sets limits on the scope of governmental power, even a government whose rulers are selected from among the governed (i.e., a republic) and whose powers are said to have their origins in the governed (i.e., a democracy) will eventually devolve into the worst, and most deeply entrenched, absolutism. Ultimately, he argues that Jesus, by his words, gave mankind an understanding of the division of power that places limits upon the scope of the power left to the government of a free and just society:

"But when Christ said: *'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's,'* those words, spoken on His last visit to the Temple, three days before His death, gave to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed, and bounds it had never acknowledged; and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of Freedom."

This speech is a must read for any person who seeks to develop an understanding of the various ways in which individual freedom has been justified and defended, and its origins explained.

Liberty, next to religion has been the motive of good deeds and the common pretext of crime, from the sowing of the seed at Athens, 2,460 years ago, until the ripened harvest was gathered by men of our race. It is the delicate fruit of a mature civilization; and scarcely a century has passed since nations, that knew the meaning of the term, resolved to be free. In every age its progress has been beset by its natural enemies, by ignorance and superstition, by lust of conquest and by love of ease, by the strong man's craving for power, and the poor man's craving for food. During long intervals it has been utterly arrested, when nations were being rescued from barbarism and from the grasp of strangers, and when the perpetual struggle for existence, depriving men of all interest and understanding in politics, has made them eager to sell their birthright for a pottage, and ignorant of the treasure they resigned. At all times sincere friends of freedom have been rare, and its triumphs have been due to minorities, that have prevailed by associating themselves with auxiliaries whose objects often differed from their own; and this association, which is always dangerous, has been sometimes disastrous, by giving to opponents just ground of opposition, and by kindling dispute over the spoils in the hour of success. No obstacle has been so constant, or so difficult to overcome as uncertainty and confusion touching the nature of true liberty. If hostile interests have wrought much injury, false ideas have wrought still more; and its advance is recorded in the increase of knowledge as much as in the improvement of laws. The history of institutions is often a history of deception and illusions; for their virtue depends on the ideas that produce and on the spirit that preserves them; and the form may remain unaltered when the substance has passed away.

A few familiar examples from modern politics will explain why it is that the burden of my argument will lie outside the domain of legislation. It is often said that our constitution attained its formal perfection in 1679, when the Habeas Corpus Act was passed. Yet Charles II succeeded, only two years later, in making himself independent of Parliament. In 1789, while the States General assembled at Versailles, the Spanish Cortes, older than Magna Charta and more venerable than our House of Commons, were summoned after an interval of generations; but they immediately prayed the King to abstain from consulting them, and to make his

reforms of his own wisdom and authority. According to the common opinion, indirect elections are a safeguard of conservatism. But all the assemblies of the French Revolution issued from indirect election. A restricted suffrage is another reputed security for monarchy. But the parliament of Charles X, which was returned by 90,000 electors, resisted and overthrew the throne; whilst the parliament of Louis Philippe, chosen by a constituency of 250,000, obsequiously promoted the reactionary policy of his ministers, and, in the fatal division which, by rejecting reform, laid the monarchy in the dust, Guizot's majority was obtained by the votes of 129 public functionaries. An unpaid legislature is, for obvious reasons, more independent than most of the continental legislatures which receive pay. But it would be unreasonable in America to send a member as far as from here to Constantinople to live for twelve months at his own expense in the dearest of capital cities. Legally and to outward seeming the American President is the successor of Washington, and still enjoys powers devised and limited by the Convention of Philadelphia. In reality the new President differs from the Magistrate imagined by the Fathers of the Republic as widely as Monarchy from Democracy; for he is expected to make 70,000 changes in the public service: fifty years ago John Quincy Adams dismissed only two men. The purchase of judicial appointments is manifestly indefensible; yet in the old French monarchy that monstrous practice created the only corporation able to resist the King. Official corruption, which would ruin a commonwealth, serves in Russia as a salutary relief from the pressure of absolutism. There are conditions in which it is scarcely a hyperbole to say that slavery itself is a stage on the road to freedom. Therefore we are not so much concerned this evening with the dead letter of edicts and of statutes as with the living thoughts of men. A century ago it was perfectly well known that whoever had one audience of a Master in Chancery was made to pay for three, but no man heeded the enormity until it suggested to a young lawyer the idea that it might be well to question and examine with rigorous suspicion every part of a system in which such things were done. The day on which that gleam lighted up the clear hard intellect of Jeremy Bentham is memorable in the political calendar beyond the entire administration of many statesmen. It would be easy to point out a paragraph in St. Augustine, or a sentence of Grotius that outweighs in influence the acts of fifty parliaments; and our cause owes more

to Cicero and Seneca, to Vinet and Tocqueville than to the laws of Lycurgus or the Five Codes of France.

By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes his duty, against the influence of authority and majorities, custom and opinion. The state is competent to assign duties and draw the line between good and evil only in its own immediate sphere. Beyond the limit of things necessary for its wellbeing, it can only give indirect help to fight the battle of life, by promoting the influences which avail against temptation,—Religion, Education, and the distribution of Wealth. In ancient times the state absorbed authorities not its own, and intruded on the domain of personal freedom. In the middle ages it possessed too little authority, and suffered others to intrude. Modern states fall habitually into both excesses. The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities. Liberty, by this definition, is the essential condition and guardian of Religion; and it is in the history of the chosen People, accordingly, that the first illustrations of my subject are obtained. The government of the Israelites was a Federation, held together by no political authority, but by the unity of race and faith, and founded, not on physical force, but on a voluntary covenant. The principle of self-government was carried out not only in each tribe, but in every group of at least 120 families; and there was neither privilege of rank, nor inequality before the law. Monarchy was so alien to the primitive spirit of the community that it was resisted by Samuel in that momentous protestation and warning which all the kingdoms of Asia and many of the kingdoms of Europe have unceasingly confirmed. The throne was erected on a compact; and the King was deprived of the right of legislation among a people that recognized no lawgiver but God, whose highest aim in politics was to restore the original purity of the constitution, and to make its government conform to the ideal type that was hallowed by the sanctions of heaven. The inspired men who rose up in un failing succession to prophesy against the usurper and the tyrant, constantly proclaimed that the laws, which were divine, were paramount over sinful rulers, and appealed from the established authorities, from the king, the priests, and the princes of the people, to the healing forces that slept in the uncorrupted conscience of the masses. Thus the example of the Hebrew nation laid down the parallel lines on which all freedom has

been won—the doctrine of national tradition, and the doctrine of the higher law; the principle that a constitution grows from a root, by process of development and not of essential change; and the principle that all political authorities must be tested and reformed according to a code which was not made by man. The operation of these two principles, in unison or in antagonism, occupies the whole of the space we are going over together.

The conflict between Liberty under divine authority and the absolutism of human authorities ended disastrously. In the year 622 a supreme effort was made at Jerusalem to reform and to preserve the state. The High Priest produced from the temple of Jehova the Book of the deserted and forgotten Law, and both king and people bound themselves by solemn oaths to observe it. But that early example of limited Monarchy and of the supremacy of law neither lasted nor spread; and the forces by which Freedom has conquered must be sought elsewhere. In the very year 586, in which the flood of Asiatic despotism closed over the city which had been and was destined again to be the sanctuary of Freedom in the East, a new home was prepared for it in the West, where, guarded by the sea, and the mountains, and by valiant hearts, that stately plant was reared under whose shade we dwell, and which is extending its invincible arms so slowly and yet so surely over the civilized world.

According to a famous saying of the most famous authoress of the continent, Liberty is ancient; and it is Despotism that is new. It has been the pride of recent historians to vindicate the truth of that maxim. The heroic age of Greece confirms it, and it is still more conspicuously true of Teutonic Europe. Wherever we can trace the earlier life of the Aryan nations we discover germs which favouring circumstances and assiduous culture might have developed into free societies. They exhibit some sense of common interest in common concerns, little reverence for external authority, and an imperfect sense of the function and supremacy of the state. Where the division of property and of labour is incomplete, there is little division of classes and of power. Until societies are tried by the complex problems of civilization they may escape despotism, as societies that are undisturbed by religious diversity avoid persecution. In general, the forms of the patriarchal age failed to resist the growth of absolute states when the difficulties and temptations of advancing life began to tell; and with one sovereign

exception, which is not within my scope to-day, it is scarcely possible to trace their survival in the institutions of later times. Six hundred years before the Birth of Christ absolutism held unbounded sway. Throughout the East it was propped by the unchanging influence of priests and armies. In the West, where there were no sacred books requiring trained interpreters, the priesthood acquired no preponderance, and when the kings were overthrown their powers passed to aristocracies of birth. What followed, during many generations, was the cruel domination of class over class, the oppression of the poor by the rich, and of the ignorant by the wise. The spirit of that domination found passionate utterance in the verses of the aristocratic poet Theognis, a man of genius and refinement, who avows that he longed to drink the blood of his political adversaries. From these oppressors the people of many cities sought deliverance in the less intolerable tyranny of revolutionary usurpers. The remedy gave new shape and new energy to the evil. The tyrants were often men of surprising capacity and merit, like some of those who, in the fourteenth century, made themselves lords of Italian cities; but rights secured by equal laws and by sharing power existed nowhere.

From this universal degradation the world was rescued by the most gifted of the nations. Athens, which like other cities was distracted and oppressed by a privileged class, avoided violence and appointed Solon to revise its laws. It was the happiest choice that history records. Solon was not only the wisest man to be found in Athens, but the most profound political genius of antiquity; and the easy, bloodless, and pacific revolution by which he accomplished the deliverance of his country was the first step in a career which our age glories in pursuing, and instituted a power which has done more than anything, except revealed religion, for the regeneration of society. The upper class had possessed the right of making and administering the laws, and he left them in possession, only transferring to wealth what had been the privilege of birth. To the rich, who alone had the means of sustaining the burden of public service in taxation and war, Solon gave a share of power proportioned to the demands made on their resources. The poorest classes were exempt from direct taxes, but were excluded from office. Solon gave them a voice in electing magistrates from the classes above them, and the right of calling them to account. This concession, apparently so slender, was the beginning of a mighty

change. It introduced the idea that a man ought to have a voice in selecting those to whose rectitude and wisdom he is compelled to trust his fortune, his family, and his life. And this idea completely inverted the notion of human authority, for it inaugurated the reign of moral influence where all political power had depended on physical force. Government by consent superseded government by compulsion, and the pyramid which had stood on a point was made to stand upon its base. By making every citizen the guardian of his own interest, Solon admitted the element of Democracy into the State. The greatest glory of a ruler, he said, is to create a popular government. Believing that no man can be entirely trusted, he subjected all who exercised power to the vigilant control of those for whom they acted.

The only resource against political disorders that had been known till then was the concentration of power. Solon undertook to effect the same object by the distribution of power. He gave to the common people as much influence as he thought them able to employ, that the State might be exempt from arbitrary government. It is the essence of Democracy, he said, to obey no master but the law. Solon recognised the principle that political forms are not final or invariable, and must adapt themselves to facts; and he provided so well for the revision of his constitution, without breach of continuity, or loss of stability that, for centuries after his death the Attic orators attributed to him, and quoted by his name the whole structure of Athenian law. The direction of its growth was determined by the fundamental doctrine of Solon, that political power ought to be commensurate with public service. In the Persian war the services of the Democracy eclipsed those of the patrician orders, for the fleet that swept the Asiatics from the Aegean Sea was manned by the poorer Athenians. That class whose valour had saved the state, and had preserved European civilization, had gained a title to increase of influence and privilege. The offices of state, which had been a monopoly of the rich were thrown open to the poor, and in order to make sure that they should obtain their share, all but the highest commands were distributed by lot.

Whilst the ancient authorities were decaying, there was no accepted standard of moral and political right to make the framework of society fast in the midst of change. The instability which had seized on the forms threatened the very principles of



government. The national beliefs were yielding to doubt, and doubt was not yet making way for knowledge. There had been a time when the obligations of public as well as private life were identified with the will of the gods. But that time had passed. Pallas, the ethereal goddess of the Athenians, and the Sun god whose oracles delivered from the temple between the twin summits of Parnassus did so much for the Greek nationality, aided in keeping up a lofty ideal of religion; but when the enlightened men of Greece learnt to apply their keen faculty of reasoning to the system of their inherited belief they became quickly conscious that the conceptions of the gods corrupted the life and degraded the minds of the people. Popular morality could not be sustained by the popular religion. The moral instruction which was no longer supplied by the gods could not yet be found in books. There was no venerable code expounded by experts, no doctrine proclaimed by men of reputed sanctity like those teachers of the far East whose words still rule the faith of nearly half mankind. The effort to account for things by close observation and exact reasoning began by destroying. There came a time when the philosophers of the Porch and the Academy wrought the dictates of wisdom and virtue into a system so consistent and profound that it has vastly shortened the task of the Christian divines. But that time has not yet come.

The epoch of doubt and transition during which the Greeks passed from the dim fancies of mythology to the fierce light of science was the age of Pericles, and the endeavour to substitute certain truth for the prescriptions of impaired authorities which was then beginning to absorb the energies of the Greek intellect is the grandest movement in the profane annals of mankind, for to it we owe, even after the immeasurable progress accomplished by Christianity, much of our philosophy, and far the better part of all the political knowledge we possess. Pericles, who was at the head of the Athenian government, was the first statesman who encountered the problem which the rapid weakening of traditions forced on the political world. No authority in morals or in politics remained unshaken by the motion that was in the air. No guide could be confidently trusted; there was no available criterion to appeal to, for the means of controlling or denying convictions that prevailed among the people. The popular sentiment as to what was right might be mistaken, but it was subject to no test. The people

were, for practical purposes, the seat of the knowledge of good and evil. The people, therefore, were the seat of power.

The political philosophy of Pericles consisted of this conclusion. He resolutely struck away all the props that still sustained the artificial preponderance of wealth. For the ancient doctrine that power goes with land, he introduced the idea that power ought to be so equitably diffused as to afford equal security to all. That one part of the community should govern the whole, or that one class should make laws for another, he declared to be tyrannical. The abolition of privilege would have served only to transfer the supremacy from the rich to the poor, if Pericles had not redressed the balance by restricting the rights of citizenship to Athenians of pure descent. By this measure the class which formed what we should call the third estate was brought down to 14,000 citizens, and became about equal in numbers with the higher ranks. Pericles held that every Athenian who neglected to take his part in the public business inflicted an injury on the commonwealth. That none might be excluded by poverty he caused the poor to be paid for their attendance out of the funds of the state; for his administration of the federal tribute had brought together a treasure of more than two millions sterling. The instrument of his sway was the art of speaking. He governed by persuasion. Everything was decided by argument in open deliberation; and every influence bowed before the ascendancy of mind. The idea that the object of constitutions is not to confirm the predominance of any interest, but to prevent it, to preserve with equal care the independence of labour and the security of property, to make the rich safe against envy, and the poor against oppression, marks the highest level attained by the statesmanship of Greece. It hardly survived the great patriot who conceived it; and all history has been occupied with the endeavour to upset the balance of power by giving the advantage to money, land, or numbers. A generation followed that has never been equaled in talent, a generation of men whose works, in poetry and eloquence are still the envy of the world, and in history, philosophy, and politics, remain unsurpassed. But it produced no successor to Pericles; and no man was able to wield the sceptre that fell from his hand.

It was a momentous step in the progress of nations when the principle that every interest should have the right and the means of

asserting itself was adopted by the Athenian constitution. But for those who were beaten in the vote there was no redress. The law did not check the triumph of majorities, or rescue the minority from the dire penalties of having been outnumbered. When the overwhelming influence of Pericles was removed, the conflict between classes raged without restraint; and the slaughter that befell the higher ranks in the Peloponnesian war gave an irresistible preponderance to the lower. The restless and inquiring spirit of the Athenians was prompt to unfold the reason of every institution and the consequences of every principle, and their constitution ran its course from infancy to decrepitude, with unexampled speed.

Two men's lives span the interval from the first admission of popular influence under Solon, to the downfall of the state. Their history furnishes the classic example of the peril of Democracy under conditions singularly favourable. For the Athenians were not only brave and patriotic and capable of generous sacrifice, but they were the most religious of the Greeks. They venerated the constitution which had given them prosperity and equality and the pride of freedom, and never questioned the fundamental laws which regulated the enormous power of the Assembly. They tolerated considerable variety of opinion, and great license of speech; and their humanity towards their slaves roused the indignation even of the most intelligent partisan of aristocracy. Thus they became the only people of antiquity that grew great by democratic institutions. But the possession of unlimited power, which corrodes the conscience, hardens the heart, and confounds the understanding of monarchs exercised its demoralizing influence on the illustrious Democracy of Athens. It is bad to be oppressed by a minority; but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority. For there is a reserve of latent power in the masses which, if it is called into play, the minority can seldom resist. But from the absolute will of an entire people there is no appeal, no redemption, no refuge but treason. The humblest and most numerous class of the Athenians united the legislative, the judicial, and in part, the executive power. The philosophy that was then in the ascendant taught them that there is no law superior to that of the state, and that, in the state, the law-giver is above the law.

It followed that the sovereign people had a right to do whatever was within its power, and was bound by no rule of right and wrong but

its own judgment of expediency. On a memorable occasion the assembled Athenians declared it monstrous that they should be prevented from doing whatever they chose. No force that existed could restrain them; and they resolved that no duty should restrain them, and that they would be bound by no laws that were not of their own making. In this way the emancipated people of Athens became a tyrant; and their government, the pioneer of European Freedom, stands condemned with a terrible unanimity by all the wisest of the ancients. They ruined their city by attempting to conduct war by debate in the market-place. Like the French Republic they put their unsuccessful commanders to death. They treated their dependencies with such injustice that they lost their maritime empire. They plundered the rich, until the rich conspired with the public enemy; and they crowned their guilt by the martyrdom of Socrates.

When the absolute sway of numbers had endured for near a quarter of a century, nothing but bare existence was left for the state to lose; and the Athenians, wearied and despondent, confessed the true cause of their ruin. They understood that for liberty, justice, and equal laws, it is as necessary that the Democracy should restrain itself as it had been that it should restrain the Oligarchy. They resolved to take their stand once more upon the ancient ways, and to restore the order of things which had subsisted when the monopoly of power had been taken from the rich and had not been acquired by the poor. After a first restoration had failed, which is only memorable because Thucydides, whose judgment in politics is never at fault, pronounced it the best government Athens had enjoyed, the attempt was renewed with more experience and greater singleness of purpose. The hostile parties were reconciled, and proclaimed an amnesty, the first in history. They resolved to govern by concurrence. The laws which had the sanction of tradition, were reduced to a code; and no act of the sovereign assembly was valid with which they might be found to disagree. Between the sacred lines of the constitution which were to remain inviolate, and the decrees which met from time to time the needs and notions of the day, a broad distinction was drawn; and the fabric of law which had been the work of generations was made independent of momentary variations in the popular will. The repentance of the Athenians came too late to save the Republic. But the lesson of their experience endures for all time, for it teaches

that government by the whole people, being the government of the most numerous and most powerful class, is an evil of the same nature as unmixed monarchy, and requires, for nearly the same reasons, institutions that shall protect it against itself, and shall uphold the permanent reign of law against arbitrary revolutions of opinion.

Parallel with the rise and fall of Athenian freedom, Rome was employed in working out the same problems, with greater constructive sense, and greater temporary success, but ending at last in a far more terrible catastrophe. That which among the ingenious Athenians had been a development carried forward by the spell of plausible argument, was in Rome a conflict between rival forces. Speculative politics had no attraction for the grim and practical genius of the Romans. They did not consider what would be the cleverest way of getting over a difficulty, but what way was indicated by analogous cases; and they assigned less influence to the impulse and spirit of the moment, than to precedent and example. Their peculiar character prompted them to ascribe the origin of their laws to early times, and in their desire to justify the continuity of their institutions and to get rid of the reproach of innovation, they imagined the legendary history of the Kings of Rome. The energy of their adherence to traditions made their progress slow, they advanced only under compulsion of almost unavoidable necessity, and the same questions recurred often before they were settled. The constitutional history of the Republic turns on the endeavors of the aristocracy, who claimed to be the only true Romans, to retain in their hands the power they had wrested from the Kings, and of the plebeians to get an equal share in it. And this controversy, which the eager and restless Athenians went through in one generation, lasted for more than two centuries, from a time when the plebs were excluded from the government of the city, and were taxed, and made to serve without pay, until, in the year 285, they were admitted to political equality. Then followed 150 years of unexampled prosperity and glory; and then, out of the original conflict which had been compromised, if not theoretically settled, a new struggle arose which was without an issue.

The mass of poorer families, impoverished by incessant service in war, were reduced to dependence on an aristocracy of about 2000

wealthy men, who divided among themselves the immense domains of the state. When the need became intense the Gracchi tried to relieve it by inducing the richer classes to allot some share in the public lands to the common people. The old and famous aristocracy of birth and rank had made a stubborn resistance, but it knew the art of yielding. The later and more selfish aristocracy was unable to learn it. The character of the people was changed by the sterner motives of dispute. The fight for political power had been carried on with the moderation which is so honourable a quality of party contests in England. But the struggle for the objects of material existence grew to be as ferocious as civil controversies in France. Repulsed by the rich after a struggle of 22 years, the people, 320,000 of whom depended on public rations for food, were ready to follow any man who promised to obtain for them by revolution what they could not obtain by law.

For a time the Senate, representing the ancient and threatened order of things, was strong enough to overcome every popular leader that arose, until Julius Caesar supported by an army which he had led in an unparalleled career of conquest, and by the famished masses which he won by his lavish liberality, and skilled beyond all other men in the imperial art of governing, converted the Republic into a Monarchy by a series of measures that were neither violent nor injurious.

The Empire preserved the republican forms until the reign of Diocletian; but the will of the Emperors was as uncontrolled as that of the people had been after the victory of the Tribunes. Their power was arbitrary, even when it was most wisely employed; and yet the Roman Empire rendered greater services to the cause of Liberty than the Roman Republic. I do not mean by reason of the temporary accident that there were emperors who made good use of their immense opportunities, such as Nerva, of whom Tacitus says that he combined Monarchy and Liberty, things otherwise incompatible; or that the empire was what its panegyrists declared it, the perfection of Democracy. In truth it was at best, an illdisguised and odious despotism. But Frederic the Great was a despot; yet he was a friend to toleration and free discussion. The Bonapartes were despotic; yet no liberal ruler was ever more acceptable to the masses of the people than the First Napoleon, after he had destroyed the Republic, in 1805, and the Third

Napoleon, at the height of his power in 1859. In the same way, the Roman empire possessed merits which, at a distance, and especially at a great distance of time, concern men more deeply than the tragic tyranny which was felt in the neighbourhood of the palace. The poor had what they had demanded in vain of the Republic. The rich fared better than during the Triumvirate. The rights of Roman citizens were extended to the people of the Provinces. To the imperial epoch belong the better part of Roman literature and nearly the entire Civil Law; and it was the Empire that mitigated slavery, instituted religious toleration, made a beginning of the law of nations, and created a perfect system of the law of property. The Republic which Caesar overthrew had been anything but a free state. It provided admirable securities for the rights of citizens; it treated with savage disregard the rights of men; and allowed the free Roman to inflict atrocious wrongs on his children, on debtors and dependents, on prisoners and slaves. Those deeper ideas of right and duty which are not found on the tables of municipal law, but with which the generous minds of Greece were conversant, were held of little account, and the philosophy which dealt with such speculations was repeatedly proscribed, as a teacher of sedition and impiety.

At length, in the year 155, the Athenian philosopher Carneades appeared at Rome, on a political mission. During an interval of official business, he delivered two public orations, to give the unlettered conquerors of his country a taste of the disputations that flourished in the Attic schools. On the first day he discoursed of natural justice. On the next he denied its existence, arguing that all our notions of good and evil are derived from positive enactment. From the time of that memorable display, the genius of the vanquished people held its conquerors in thrall. The most eminent of the public men of Rome, such as Scipio and Cicero, formed their minds on Grecian models, and her jurists underwent the rigorous discipline of Zeno and Chrysippus.

If, drawing the limit in the second century, when the influence of Christianity becomes perceptible, we should form our judgment of the politics of antiquity by its actual legislation, our estimate would be low. The prevailing notions of freedom were imperfect, and the endeavours to realize them were wide of the mark. The ancients understood the regulation of power better than the regulation of

liberty. They concentrated so many prerogatives on the state as to leave no footing from which a man could deny its jurisdiction or assign bounds to its activity. If I may employ an expressive anachronism, the vice of the classic state was that it was both Church and State in one. Morality was undistinguished from religion, and politics from morals; and in religion, morality and politics there was only one legislator and one authority. The state, while it did deplorably little for education, for practical science, for the indigent and helpless, or for the spiritual needs of man, nevertheless claimed the use of all his faculties and the determination of all his duties. Individuals and families, associations and dependencies were so much material that the sovereign power consumed for its own purposes. What the slave was in the hands of his master the citizen was in the hands of the community. The most sacred obligations vanished before the public advantage. The passengers existed for the sake of the ship. By their disregard for private interests, and for the moral welfare and improvement of the people, both Greece and Rome destroyed the vital elements on which the prosperity of nations rests, and perished by the decay of families and the depopulation of the country. They survive not in their institutions, but in their ideas, and by their ideas, especially on the art of government, they are

“The dead, but sceptred sovereigns who still rule  
Our spirits from their urns.”

To them, indeed, may be tracked nearly all the errors that are undermining political society—Communism, Utilitarianism, the confusion between tyranny and authority, and between lawlessness and freedom.

The notion that men lived originally in a state of nature, by violence and without laws, is due to Critias. Communism in its grossest form was recommended by Diogenes of Sinope. According to the Sophists, there is no duty above expediency, and no virtue apart from pleasure. Laws are an invention of weak men to rob their betters of the reasonable enjoyment of their superiority. It is better to inflict than to suffer wrong; and as there is no greater good than to do evil without fear of retribution, so there is no worse evil than to suffer without the consolation of revenge. Justice is the mask of a craven spirit; injustice is worldly wisdom; and duty, obedience, self-



denial are the impostures of hypocrisy. Government is absolute, and may ordain what it pleases; and no subject can complain that it does him wrong; but as long as he can escape compulsion and punishment, he is always free to disobey. Happiness consists in obtaining power, and in eluding the necessity of obedience; and he that gains a throne, by perfidy and murder, deserves to be truly envied.

Epicurus differed but little from these propounders of the code of revolutionary despotism. All societies, he said, are founded on contract for mutual protection. Good and evil are conventional terms, for the thunderbolts of heaven fall alike on the just and on the unjust. The objection to wrongdoing is not in the act but in its consequences to the wrongdoer. Wise men contrive laws, not to bind, but to protect themselves; and when they prove to be unprofitable they cease to be valid. The illiberal sentiments of even the most illustrious metaphysicians are disclosed in the saying of Aristotle, that the mark of the worst governments is that they leave men free to live as they please.

If you will bear in mind that Socrates, the best of the pagans, knew of no higher criterion for men, of no better guide of conduct than the laws of each country; that Plato, whose sublime doctrine was so near an anticipation of Christianity that celebrated theologians wished his works to be forbidden, lest men should be content with them, and indifferent to any higher dogma,—to whom was granted that prophetic vision of the Just Man, accused, condemned, and scourged, and dying on a Cross,—nevertheless employed the most splendid intellect ever bestowed on man, to advocate the abolition of the family and the exposure of infants; that Aristotle, the ablest moralist of antiquity, saw no harm in making raids upon neighbouring people for the sake of reducing them to slavery,—still more, if you will consider that, among the moderns, men of genius equal to these have held political doctrines not less criminal or absurd—it will be apparent to you how stubborn a phalanx of error blocks the paths of Truth; that pure Reason is as powerless as Custom to solve the problem of free government; that it can only be the fruit of long, manifold, and painful experience; and that the tracing of the methods by which divine wisdom has educated the nations to appreciate and to assume the duties of Freedom, is not the least part of that true philosophy that studies to

“Assert eternal Providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men.”

But, having sounded the depth of their errors, I should give you a very inadequate idea of the wisdom of the ancients, if I allowed it to appear that their precepts were no better than their practice. While statesmen and senates and popular assemblies supplied examples of every description of blunder, a noble literature arose, in which a priceless treasure of political knowledge was stored and in which the defects of the existing institutions were exposed with unsparing sagacity. The point on which the ancients were most nearly unanimous is the right of the people to govern, and their inability to govern alone. To meet this difficulty, to give to the popular element a full share, without a monopoly, of power, they adopted very generally the theory of a mixed constitution. They differed from our notion of the same thing, because modern constitutions have been a device for limiting monarchy; with them they were invented to curb Democracy. The idea arose in the time of Plato—though he repelled it—when the early monarchies and oligarchies had vanished; and it continued to be cherished long after all democracies had been absorbed in the Roman Empire. But whereas a sovereign prince who surrenders part of his authority yields to the argument of superior force; a sovereign people, relinquishing its own prerogative, succumbs to the influence of Reason. And it has in all times proved more easy to create limitations by the use of force than by persuasion.

The ancient writers saw very clearly that each principle of government standing alone, is carried to excess and provokes a reaction. Monarchy hardens into despotism. Aristocracy contracts into oligarchy. Democracy expands into the supremacy of numbers. They therefore imagined that to restrain each element by combining it with the others, would avert the natural process of self-destruction, and endow the state with perpetual youth. But this harmony of Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy blended together, which was the ideal of many writers, and which they supposed to be exhibited by Sparta, by Carthage, and by Rome, was a chimera of philosophers never realized by antiquity. At last, Tacitus, wiser than the rest, confessed that the mixed constitution, however admirable in theory, was difficult to establish and

impossible to maintain. His disheartening avowal is not disowned by later experience.

The experiment has been tried more often than I can tell, with a combination of resources that were unknown to the ancients—with Christianity, parliamentary government, and a free press. Yet there is no example of such a balanced constitution having lasted a century. If it has succeeded anywhere it has been in our favoured country and in our time: and we know not yet how long the wisdom of the nation will preserve the equipoise. The Federal check was as familiar to the ancients as the Constitutional. For the type of all their Republics was the government of a city by its own inhabitants meeting in the public place. An administration embracing many cities was known to them only in the form of the oppression which Sparta exercised over the Messenians, Athens over her Confederates, and Rome over Italy. The resources which in modern times enabled a great people to govern itself through a single centre did not exist. Equality could be preserved only by Federalism; and it occurs more often amongst them than in the modern world. If the distribution of power among the several parts of the state is the most efficient restraint on monarchy, the distribution of power among several states is the best check on Democracy. By multiplying centres of government and discussion, it promotes the diffusion of political Knowledge and the maintenance of healthy and independent opinion. It is the protectorate of minorities, and the consecration of self-government. But although it must be enumerated among the better achievements of practical genius in antiquity, it arose from necessity, and its properties were imperfectly investigated in theory.

When the Greeks began to reflect on the problems of society, they first of all accepted things as they were, and did their best to explain and to defend them. Enquiry which with us is stimulated by doubt, began with them in wonder. The most illustrious of the early philosophers, Pythagoras, promulgated a theory for the preservation of political power in the educated class, and ennobled a form of government which was generally founded on popular ignorance, and on strong class interests. He preached authority and subordination, and dwelt more on duties than on rights, on Religion than on policy; and his system perished in the revolution by which

Oligarchies were swept away. The Revolution afterwards developed its own philosophy, whose excesses I have described.

But between the two eras, between the rigid didactics of the early Pythagoreans and the dissolving theories of Protagoras, a philosopher arose who stood aloof from both extremes, and whose difficult sayings were never really understood or valued until our time. Heraclitus, of Ephesus, deposited his book in the temple of Diana. The book has perished, like the temple and the worship; but its fragments have been collected and interpreted with incredible ardour, by the scholars, the divines, the philosophers and politicians who have been engaged the most intensely in the toil and stress of this century. The most renowned logician of the last generation adopted every one of his propositions; and the most brilliant agitator among continental Socialists, composed a work of 840 pages to celebrate his memory.

Heraclitus complained that the masses were deaf to truth, and knew not that one good man counts for more than thousands; but he held the existing order in no superstitious reverence. Strife, he says, is the source and the master of all things. Life is perpetual motion, and repose is death. No man can plunge twice into the same current, for it is always flowing and passing, and is never the same. The only thing fixed and certain in the midst of change is the universal and sovereign Reason which all men may not perceive, but which is common to all. Laws are sustained by no human authority, but by virtue of their derivation from the one law that is divine. These sayings, which recal[1] the grand outlines of political truth which we have found in the Sacred Books, and carry us forward to the latest teaching of our most enlightened contemporaries, would bear a good deal of elucidation and comment. Heraclitus is, unfortunately, so obscure that Socrates could not understand him and I won't pretend to have succeeded better.

If the topic of my address was the history of political science, the highest and the largest place would belong to Plato and Aristotle. The Laws of the one, the Politics of the other, are, if I may trust my own experience the books from which we may learn the most about the principles of politics. The penetration with which those great masters of thought analyzed the institutions of Greece, and exposed

their vices, is not surpassed by anything in later literature; by Burke or Hamilton, the best political writers of the last century; by Tocqueville or Roscher, the most eminent of our own. But Plato and Aristotle were philosophers, studious not of unguided freedom, but of intelligent government. They saw the disastrous effects of ill-directed striving for Liberty; and they resolved that it was better not to strive for it, but to be content with a strong administration, prudently adapted to make men prosperous and happy.

Now Liberty and good government do not exclude each other; and there are excellent reasons why they should go together; but they do not necessarily go together. Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end. It is not for the sake of a good public administration that it is required, but for security in the pursuit of the highest objects of civil society, and of private life. Increase of freedom in the state may sometimes promote mediocrity, and give vitality to prejudice; it may even retard useful legislation, diminish the capacity for war, and restrict the boundaries of Empire. It might be plausibly argued that, if many things would be worse in England or Ireland under an intelligent despotism, some things would be managed better; that the Roman government was more enlightened under Augustus and Antoninus than under the Senate, in the days of Marius or of Pompey. A generous spirit prefers that his country should be poor, and weak, and of no account, but free, rather than powerful, prosperous, and enslaved. It is better to be the citizen of a humble commonwealth in the Alps, without a prospect of influence beyond the narrow frontier, than a subject of the superb autocracy that overshadows half of Asia and of Europe. But it may be urged on the other side that liberty is not the sum or the substitute of all the things men ought to live for; that to be real it must be circumscribed, and that the limits of circumscription vary; that advancing civilization invests the state with increased rights and duties and imposes increased burdens and constraint on the subject; that a highly instructed and intelligent community may perceive the benefit of compulsory obligations which, at a lower stage would be thought unbearable; that liberal progress is not vague or indefinite, but aims at a point where the public is subject to no restrictions but those of which it feels the advantage; that a free country may be less capable of doing much for the advancement of religion, the prevention of vice, or the relief of suffering, than one that does not shrink from

confronting great emergencies by some sacrifice of individual rights, and some concentration of power; and that the supreme political object ought to be sometimes postponed to still higher moral objects. My argument involves no collision with these qualifying reflections. We are dealing not with the effects of freedom, but with its causes. We are seeking out the influences which brought arbitrary government under control, either by the diffusion of power, or by the appeal to an authority that transcends all government; and among those influences the greatest philosophers of Greece have no claim to be reckoned.

It is the Stoics who emancipated mankind from its subjugation to despotic rule, and whose enlightened and elevated views bridged the chasm that separates the ancient from the Christian state, and led the way to Freedom. Seeing how little security there is that the laws of any land shall be wise or just, and that the unanimous will of a people and the assent of nations are liable to err, the Stoics looked beyond those narrow barriers, and above those inferior sanctions for the principles that ought to regulate the lives of men and the existence of society. They made it known that there is a will superior to the collective will of man, and a law that overrules those of Solon and Lycurgus. Their test of good government is its conformity to principles that can be traced to a higher legislator. That which we must obey, that to which we are bound to reduce all civil authorities, and to sacrifice every earthly interest, is that immutable law which is perfect and eternal as God Himself, which proceeds from His nature, and reigns over heaven and earth and over all the nations.

The great question is, to discover not what governments prescribe, but what they ought to prescribe; for no prescription is valid against the conscience of mankind. Before God, there is neither Greek nor barbarian, neither rich nor poor; and the slave is as good as his master, for by birth all men are free; they are citizens of that universal commonwealth which embraces all the world, brethren of one family, and children of God. The true guide of our conduct is no outward authority, but the voice of God, who comes down to dwell in our souls, who knows all our thoughts, to whom are owing all the truth we know and all the good we do; for vice is voluntary, and virtue comes from the grace of the heavenly spirit within.

What the teaching of that divine voice is, the philosophers who had imbibed the sublime ethics of the Porch went on to expound:—It is not enough to act up to the written law, or to give all men their due; we ought to give them more than their due, to be generous and beneficent, to devote ourselves for the good of others, seeking our reward in self-denial and sacrifice, acting from the motive of sympathy, and not of personal advantage. Therefore we must treat others as we wish to be treated by them, and must persist until death in doing good to our enemies, regardless of unworthiness and ingratitude. For we must be at war with evil, but at peace with men, and it is better to suffer than to commit injustice. True Freedom, says the most eloquent of the Stoics, consists in obeying God. A state governed by such principles as these would have been free far beyond the measure of Greek or Roman freedom; for they open a door to religious toleration, and close it against slavery. Neither conquest nor purchase, said Zeno, can make one man the property of another.

These doctrines were adopted and applied by the great jurists of the empire. The law of Nature, they said, is superior to the written law, and slavery contradicts the law of Nature. Men have no right to do what they please with their own, or to make profit out of another's loss. Such is the political wisdom of the ancients, touching the foundations of Liberty, as we find it in its highest development, in Cicero, and Seneca, and Philo, a Jew of Alexandria. Their writings impress upon us the greatness of the work of preparation for the Gospel which had been accomplished among men on the eve of the mission of the Apostles. St. Augustine, after quoting Seneca exclaims: "What more could a Christian say than this pagan has said?" The enlightened pagans had reached nearly the last point attainable without a new dispensation, when the fullness of time was come. We have seen the breadth and the splendour of the domain of Hellenic thought, and it has brought us to the threshold of a greater Kingdom. The best of the later classics speak almost the language of Christianity, and they border on its spirit.

But in all that I have been able to cite from classical literature, three things are wanting: Representative Government, the emancipation of the slaves, and liberty of conscience. There were, it is true, deliberative assemblies, chosen by the people; and

confederate cities, of which, both in Asia and in Europe there were so many Leagues, sent their delegates, to sit in federal councils. But government by an elected parliament was, even in theory, a thing unknown. It is congruous with the nature of Polytheism to admit some measure of toleration. And Socrates, when he avowed that he must obey God rather than the Athenians, and the Stoics, when they set the wise man above the law, were very near giving utterance to the principle. But it was first proclaimed, and established by enactment, not in polytheistic and philosophical Greece, but in India, by Asoka, the earliest of the Buddhist kings, 250 years before the Birth of Christ.

Slavery has been, far more than intolerance, the perpetual curse and reproach of ancient civilization; and although its rightfulness was disputed as early as the days of Aristotle, and was implicitly if not definitely denied by several Stoics, the moral philosophy of the Greeks and Romans, as well as their practise, pronounced decidedly in its favour. But there was one extraordinary people who, in this as in other things anticipated the purer precept that was to come. Philo of Alexandria is one of the writers whose views on society were most advanced. He applauds not only liberty but equality in the enjoyment of wealth. He believes that a limited democracy, purged of its grosser elements, is the most perfect government, and will extend itself gradually over all the world. By freedom he understood the following of God. Philo, though he required that the condition of the slave should be made compatible with the wants and the claims of his higher nature, did not absolutely condemn slavery. But he has put on record the customs of the Essenes of Palestine, a people who, uniting the wisdom of the Gentiles with the faith of the Jews led lives which were uncontaminated by the surrounding civilization and were the first to reject slavery both in principle and practice. They formed a religious community rather than a state, and their numbers did not exceed 4,000. But their example testifies to how great a height religious men were able to raise their conception of society even without the succour of the New Testament, and affords the strongest condemnation of their contemporaries.

This then is the conclusion to which our survey brings us:—There is hardly a truth in politics or in the system of the rights of man, that was not grasped by the wisest of the Gentiles and the Jews, or that



they did not declare with a refinement of thought and a nobleness of expression that later writers could never surpass. I might go on for hours, reciting to you passages on the law of Nature and the duties of man, so solemn and religious, that though they come from the profane theatre on the Acropolis, and from the Roman Forum, you would deem that you were listening to the hymns of Christian Churches, and the discourse of ordained divines. But although the maxims of the great classic teachers, of Sophocles and Plato and Seneca, and the glorious examples of public virtue were in the mouths of all men, there was no power in them to avert the doom of that civilization for which the blood of so many patriots and the genius of such incomparable writers had been wasted in vain. The liberties of the ancient nations were crushed beneath a hopeless and inevitable despotism, and their vitality was spent, when the new power came forth from Galilee, giving what was wanting to the efficacy of human knowledge, to redeem societies as well as men.

It would be presumptuous if I attempted to indicate the numberless channels by which Christian influence gradually penetrated the state. The first striking phenomenon is the slowness with which an action destined to be so prodigious became manifest. Going forth to all nations, in many stages of civilization and under almost every form of government, Christianity had none of the character of a political apostolate, and in its absorbing mission to individuals, did not challenge public authority. The early Christians avoided contact with the state, abstained from the responsibilities of office, and were even reluctant to serve in the army. Cherishing their citizenship of a Kingdom not of this world, they despaired of an empire which seemed too powerful to be resisted and too corrupt to be converted, whose institutions, the work and the pride of untold centuries of paganism, drew their sanctions from the gods whom the Christians accounted devils, which plunged its hands from age to age in the blood of martyrs, and was beyond the hope of regeneration and foredoomed to perish. They were so much overawed as to imagine that the fall of the state would be the end of the Church and of the world; and no man dreamed of the boundless future of spiritual and social influence that awaited their Religion among the race of destroyers that were bringing the empire of Augustus and of Constantine to humiliation and ruin. The duties of government were less in their thoughts than the private virtues and duties of subjects; and it was long before they became aware of the

burden of power in their faith. Down almost to the time of Chrysostom, they shrank from contemplating the obligation to emancipate the slaves.

Although the doctrine of selfreliance and selfdenial which is the foundation of political economy, was written as legibly in the New Testament as in the Wealth of Nations, it was not recognized until our age. Tertullian boasts of the passive obedience of the Christians. Melito writes to a pagan emperor as if he were incapable of giving an unjust command; and in Christian times, Optatus thought that whoever presumed to find fault with his sovereign, exalted himself almost to the level of a god. But this political quietism was not universal. Origen, the ablest writer of early times, spoke with approval of conspiring for the destruction of tyranny.

After the fourth century the declarations against slavery are earnest and continual. And in a theological but yet pregnant sense divines of the second century insist on Liberty, and divines of the fourth century on equality. There was one essential and inevitable transformation in politics. Popular governments had existed, and also mixed, and federal governments, but there had been no limited government, no state the circumference of whose authority had been defined by a force external to its own. That was the great problem which philosophy had raised, and which no statesmanship had been able to solve. Those who proclaimed the existence of a higher authority had indeed drawn a metaphysical barrier before the governments, but they had not known how to make it real. All that Socrates could effect by way of protest against the tyranny of the reformed Democracy was to die for his convictions. The Stoics could only advise the wise man to hold aloof from politics, keeping the unwritten law in his heart. But when Christ said: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's," those words, spoken on His last visit to the Temple, three days before His death, gave to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed, and bounds it had never acknowledged; and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of Freedom. For our Lord not only delivered the precept, but created the force to execute it. To maintain the necessary immunity in one supreme sphere, to reduce all political authority within defined limits, ceased to be an

aspiration of patient reasoners, and was made the perpetual charge and care of the most energetic institution and the most universal association in the world. The new law, the new spirit, the new authority, gave to Liberty a meaning and a value it had not possessed in the philosophy or in the constitution of Greece or Rome, before the knowledge of the Truth that makes us free.